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ABSTRACT

This paper recommends the replacement of student evaluation methods based on the behaviorist model with holistic assessment based on principles of seeing individuals as active learners who interact with their physical and social environment. Four approaches are recommended: (1) gathering information from a variety of sources and contexts; (2) a willingness to accept qualitative as well as quantitative data; (3) a view of teachers as competent evaluators; and (4) focus on the primary stakeholders (students, parents, and teachers). Observation is seen to be at the heart of holistic evaluation with the grouping of observations into two categories recommended: "things I know I want to know" and "things I didn't know I wanted to know." Suggested after initial observations are the compiling of a "can do" list for each child as well as the development of individual learning objectives. (DB)

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Holistic Assessment of Special Education Students

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Holistic Assessment of Special Education Students

During the past two decades we have gained new insights into how children learn. We have discovered that children learn about print and the purposes of print long before they enter school. We have discovered that learning doesn't occur in a lock-step, sequential fashion but rather from whole to part in contextually meaningful and purposeful settings. Research (e.g. Edelshy, 1986; Ferreiro & Taberosky, 1982; K. Goodman, 1969; Y. Goodman, 1980; Goodman & Altwerger, 1981; Harste, Woodward & Burke, 1984) indicates that language learning is a simultaneously social, conceptual, and linguistic process and learning to read and write is learning the supersystem of conventions that governs all the interactive social, conceptual, and linguistic contexts for one's community (Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991).

While this pool of knowledge has been gathering and a holistic theory of learning has been developing during the last two decades, we in special education have been involved in processing exceptional students through special educational services via an assessment cycle based on a behaviorist model which assumes a disability can be objectively identified and treatment can be implemented. Treatment has been prescribed based on results of assessment procedures which have been developed from a positivist approach which assumes that we can state in advance what a child will learn, how, how well, and how long it will take. Based on a student's performance on on objective assessment measures such has standardized tests, criterion-referenced tests, or curriculum-based

measurements a student's strengths and weaknesses are determined and instruction is designed to mirror the assessment.

In other words, an evaluation procedure makes the decision about what is important to learn and complex learning is reduced to simple behavior to be quantified and measured. This is evident in behavioral objectives written on IEPs which state something like, "When shown 20 consonant-vowel -consonant short "a" words, the student will be able to read each word within two seconds with 80% accuracy. "As a result instruction is reduced to discrete tasks which are tied to the behavioral objectives and fit neatly into the assessment model.

Many educators who work with special learners, however, are beginning to reject the positivist model of behaviorist theory and are exploring the research of holistic learning. Special educators who view learning as a whole which cannot be subdivided into discrete skills and whose instruction reflects this philosophy realize that assessment based on predetermined skills cannot accurately reflect the progress of the learners in their classrooms. Therefore, assessment must be redesigned to reflect :

-that we view the individuals in our classroom as learners who gain understanding through constructing meaning from experiences

-that real learning emerges as the learner interacts with the environment

-that learning is visible in a variety of contexts depending upon the conditions and purposes

-that learning is social.

It is essential that assessment be a valid indicator of authentic learning which results from activities that are meaningful. These indicators must reflect real reading, real writing and real math which is done for real purposes.We must accept multiple responses at multiple levels which may not be anticipated in advance. For superimposing known outcomes is a reflection of an artificial construction of knowledge (Heshusius, 1991).

Assessment then should be responsive to the learner, the learner's needs, and responsive to those involved in the learner's construction of knowledge. Robert Stake (1975) introduced and described responsive evaluation as an approach which is responsive to the concerns of the individuals and groups who are affected or have a stake in the evaluation. How do we respond to these needs? There are four things we should do. First, we should gather information from a variety of sources and contexts. Second, there must be a willingness to accept not only quantitative data but also qualitative data . Third, teachers should be viewed as a competent instrument for evaluation. Finally, but most importantly,we should focus on the primary stakeholders; students, parents, and teachers. The most common practice in the past has been to first satisfy the needs of the secondary stakeholders--state and federal agencies, politicians, school districts, program directors, and assessment personnel. We've responded to their needs by designing assessment to categorize students according to a specific disability for convenience and funding, and by basing assessment around predetermined skills and behaviors.

Holistic assessment which reflects holistic learning is a way which we can respond to the needs of students, teachers, and parents. Holistic assessment evaluates learning using a variety of techniques in various contexts. It evaluates learning as it happens without preconceived levels of expectations. Data is gathered systematically by observing students in authentic learning situations , analyzing work samples, interviewing learners and conferencing with them. Most of all there is a willingness to see change and an openness to see and hear the unexpected.

Observation is the heart of holistic evaluation. Observations should be done systematically and in authentic learning situations while learners are in engaged in reading, writing, mathematics, or problem solving.While observations are a vital element to assessment, they cannot be used for a source of evaluation if they are not documented. Therefore, it is important for the classroom teacher to develop a convenient system for documentation A notebook with blank pages for each child or notes jotted on file cards or sticky notes to be transferred to individual learning files can serve the purpose.

Observations should have two categories: (1) Things I Know I Want to Know and (2) Things I Didn't Know I Wanted to Know. As a guide for the first category the teacher should decide what area of learning is of interest (i.e. oral language, reading, written expression, math). Next specific questions should be formulated. For example, "Does Sue engage in reading voluntarily? Is John able to retell a story?" The answers to the questions can be found through observing authentic learning events or during instruction.

For example, oral language can be observed when students share personal news with the class, or while the class is doing a shared reading the teacher can observe how students are able to predict text. While a student is writing the teacher can observe strategies which learners use or the teacher can ask questions about what they are writing .

For the second category, "Things I Didn't Know I Wanted to Know," record the "AHA" experiences the learner has as well as the "AHA" experiences the teachers has. Teacher "AHAs" are insights into what a child knows. For example, a seven-year old boy in a cross-categorical special education classroom made the observation that in all of the big books they had read the stories began on page five. This surprised the teacher because she did not know that he was so aware of all the print in the books.

In addition observe and note the zone of proximal development--the progress learners make from needing assistance to being independent. Perhaps when students are writing they may ask how to spell unknown words. Eventually, the learners will begin to use sources such as previous journal writing, wall charts, or dictionaries. This indicates a developing independence and this should be documented. Also, it should be noted when the learners do not use assistance for spelling words that they can remember without assistance.

After initial observations a "CAN DO" list for each child should be compiled based on the observations. The list should be a concise record of the skills and strategies that the learner is using. It should also list emerging skills and strategies. This list can be

shared with the students, parents,and other teachers. The list should be updated at least at mid-year and at the end of the year.

Holistic assessment should include information from sources other than observations. Work samples should be kept which illustrates skills which the learner is applying. These samples should have notes attached to them which indicate the learning which is represented. Audio tapes can be made to document oral reading ability. To find out information regarding the progress of learning teachers should simply ask questions related to what they want to know and decide what learning activity provides the answer. For example, if the question is, "Does Billy comprehend text?" the answer could be provided by asking Billy to do a written or oral retelling of something he has chosen to read. Answers to assessment questions come from daily learning activities which are authentic. Valid answers do not come from contrived exercises or tests which do not require students to do real reading, real writing, real mathematics, or real problem solving.

In conclusion, it is important that teachers who view learning as a whole interactive process should view assessment in the same way. Teachers must be confident in their ability to document the continuous progress that students make. When these observations are documented in a systematic manner, then a learning profile naturally occurs. This learning profile then can be used to respond to the needs of parents, the students and the teachers. The information gleaned will demonstrate to all stakeholders the real learning progress which has been accomplished. The information should be shared and discussed.At this point valid learning

objectives can be developed which can serve as accurate guideposts to all those with a stake in the process.

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